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## The Small Press Question

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## The Small Press Question

*Among genre market reports, I found occasional resentment toward the small press that can not pay beyond contributor copies. Obviously, this opinion disturbed me. So I asked those who are involved in this issue and have published professionally. -- Trent Walters, M.C. co-editor*

Margaret Carter, novelist and *The Vampire's Crypt* editor:

I am surprised to hear that anyone considers payment only in copies "stealing from the author." If the writer knowingly enters into such an agreement, "stealing" can hardly be accurate. Do writers who advance the claim of "theft" seriously believe that the editors who publish their fiction are making a profit thereby? Would it be preferable for every publication to pay for all materials? No doubt, and I do pay a token pittance for fiction contributions to my own fanzine, *The Vampire's Crypt* (<http://members.aol.com/MLCVamp/vampcrpt.htm>), because I like to help writers at least recoup some of their postage costs. But, then, I continue to lose money on the zine. I realize, though, that many editors would prefer not to lose money, or at least not quite so much money. If most of the small press periodicals that now reimburse writers only with copies could somehow be forced to pay for stories, most of them would probably not be able to publish at all, and how would \*that\* benefit authors?

Academic journals customarily don't pay at all; however, that's a whole nother can of dragon droppings. These publications seem to think their contributors should be so thrilled to have another item for their vita that they should never think of asking for something so mundane as cash. That system is unlikely to change, though, since scholarly journals probably run even further in the red than fanzines (possibly being kept afloat by subsidies from their parent institutions).

Now, I don't deny that I'm in this racket at least partly for the money. I can identify with Peg Bracken (author of *The I Hate to Cook Book*, *The I Hate to Housekeep Book*, etc.), whose grandfather advised her with his dying breath, "Dinna give it away, lass." But sometimes I have to give it away or not get into print at all. I love seeing my words on the page, I benefit from the name exposure, I enjoy reading my contributor's copies, and (being a fanzine editor myself) I know full well that the editors who "pay" only in copies do so because they can't afford to do otherwise. As much as I would like to get cash for everything I write, I have no quarrel with the existing system.

\* \* \*

Gwenyth Hood, novelist and M.C. editor:

Of course, when artists succeed, they want to be published in large print runs by the mainstream press. But not everyone starts that way. Young writers need to develop

their craft and build an audience, and small press is one of the ways to do it. J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis wrote and published their poetry for a small group of people long before they became famous. Another successful writer who first published in small press is Richard Adams, author of *Watership Down*.

\* \* \*

David Kopaska-Merkel, poet and editor of *Dreams & Nightmares* and *Star\*Line*:

I like the small press. (Duh. I'm here, ain't I?) Some people don't know what we've got--the biggest literary "family" in the world, an extension of the huge family that SF fandom still is, after all these years. And not counting "news", most literature is small press--bad and ugly yes, but good too. Check it out.

\* \* \*

Christopher McKitterick: short story writer for *Analog*, *Artemis*, and *Tomorrow*:

Simply put: If I could sell everything I wrote to SF's big three, I would. But not everything of mine is appropriate for them. That's why I submit to low-paying (or copy-"paying") magazines, because the important thing for me is publishing the stories that I like. People read all sorts of magazines!

\* \* \*

Gene Stewart, short story writer for *Aboriginal*, *MZB*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, among others: "Looking Beyond the Words"

When marketing one's writing it's best to start at the highest-paying and work down. Also, selling rights for less than 3¢/word means the sale won't count as a professional sale according to various writers' associations.

Many still accept lower rates, and some even opt to trade rights for contributor's copies and exposure. This can be a valid approach if the distribution in question is broad enough or garners the kind of attention one seeks from higher up the food-chain.

There are many small-press and semi-pro zines that pay less than 3¢/word but which are routinely surveyed by *Year's Best* anthologists, book editors, and agents.

These days there are also ezines, some of which pay above the base rate, but most of which offer little more than exposure on a web-site the ownership of the contents of which may be in dispute. Consider Yahoo's recent declaration that it owned all rights to all contents on all its sites, for example.

Until the electronic and internet rights are sorted out by Congress -- and don't hold your breath unless blue's your color -- it's best to stick with established electronic publications that pay competitive rates and offer snail-mail contracts.

Having said all this, keep in mind, too, that those top markets are flooded by unsolicited mss. They see so many submissions that are utterly wrong that their slush piles are often automatic rejection factories. Unless your goal is to waste postage and envelopes, some pre-culling ought to be done.

By all means start at the top, but before sending off a ms make sure it not only fits the specifications of your targeted market, but is also good enough to get passed up the chain from first readers to actual editors.

Getting to an editor's desk is the first hurdle, after all.

In my experience, the more established and better-paying markets do indeed tend to treat writers more professionally. However, that can be a detriment when one is starting out. A cold, professional standard rejection slip tells one nothing, after all, about what was wrong with the submission or how to correct it.

On the other hand, lower-paying markets often provide some feed-back. Some of it is rote, on a checklist, or otherwise automatic, but even these categorical kinds of rejections at least tell you something about what the editor saw. How an editor sees your work matters more than how you see it, if your goal is to sell, so knowing even generalities such as "...plot failed me..." or "...characters flat..." or "... clichéd idea..." can be of enormous help to beginning writers.

There are, of course, many markets that pay in small stipends or contributor's copies. Most of these are journals focused on one aspect of writing, as can be seen in any Writer's Market Guide, for example. These are the markets that might offer a certain kind of exposure or a certain level of personal attention. Some, such as those affiliated with college English departments, are even famous and carry a certain prestige. Again, it depends on one's goals. A genre writer is better off avoiding such markets, whereas a literary writer might benefit immensely by being showcased in the right non-paying literary journal.

As has been stated, there are different kinds of pay.

In this writer's experience even high-paying markets can have dishonest, cruel, and whimsical editors, but this isn't the venue for writer's horror stories.

Not all non-paying venues are non-professional in outlook or behavior. Some seasoning and some experience helps curb this perception. As stated, many of the finest literary journals, with very professional staffs and records, don't pay. Their lack of pay usually bespeaks either a lack of funding or a non-profit status, but it doesn't imply non-professional attitudes.

Indeed, thinking ahead of time will save you much grief and postage. Why submit blindly? Know your market, read samples, and send for guidelines. Saves time.

Writing's an art, not a profession. Unless you're on staff at a newspaper or magazine, paid a salary, then it's not a profession, it's a calling. Making a living remains an elusive dream for most published writers. Getting rich is equivalent to being struck by lightning.

And if the writing part's an avocation, the marketing part is distinctly professional, all business, with no room for sentiment or sentimentality. Romanticizing either a shoe repairman or a writer is a big mistake, if common enough. What's needed is a practical, no-nonsense approach combined with tenacity and, most important, a willingness and ability to learn.

The object of marketing one's writing is not to avoid possible pain or potential conflict, it's to sell copyrights. That's it. Emotionalism doesn't work for professionalism, only against it.

Sneering at a pay-rate after one has submitted to a publication is immature and accomplishes nothing practical. Also, seeing one's ms copy edited can often send neophyte writers into shock. They feel insulted and can't get past the emotion, which taints them. Fact is, correcting galleys is part of the job, and clarifying prose to suit editors comes with the territory of professionalism. Complaining about this is, yes, unprofessional.

However, one never knows why an editor does or doesn't buy a story. As John Carr once told me, it can come down to not liking a particular font, or a bad lunch, or the way a bird sang on the walk from the subway. One never knows because it's subjective. Many award-winning mss were rejected outright by a string of editors before one saw merit. And many more semi-competent works of near dreck have been accepted and even touted by enthusiastic editors. What were they thinking? Darned if anyone knows, least of all them.

In other words, don't project guilt, dread, or insecurity on the editor. Don't try to second-guess motives. That's emotionalism, too. Take things impersonally and work always in a businesslike manner.

Just remember that no submission need be out to a specific market any longer than the publicized response time. All one need do after that is withdraw the ms from submission and send it elsewhere. It's easy. No fuss, no muss.

And keep in mind that there are as many approaches to writing as there are writers, or moments in a writer's day. After all, some seek to meet readers' expectations, such as erotica writers, some of whom, by the way, meet Aristotle's axiom head-on, both instructing and delighting. Some are less pedantic, such as Borges. Some are concerned only with exploring the limits of their art, such as James Joyce. Some want permanence and seek the



unchanging basics, such as Hemingway. Some prefer to flit from current trend to contemporary fad, such as Tom Wolfe. Updike focuses on carving word-shapes while Stephen King wants to make your flesh creep like the Fat Boy in Pickwick.

All are good writers. Each is different. Each good in a different way. Each appreciated by some, loathed by others. Way of the world, this variety, and it enhances us. Better this than dull conformity.

Being didactic, pedantic, or discursive is a choice and neither right nor wrong. Depends on each ms. There is no set of basics that applies to all stories, any more than there is a set of basics that applies to all painting, sculpture, music, or fashion design.

And every assertion can be rebutted by an equal and opposite assertion. Way of the world again. Grow to appreciate it for its diversity and, if you disagree with an annoying point of view, write examples that contradict it, rather than bothering to debate. Lead by example. Demonstrate. Show, don't tell.

Now there's a misunderstood and over-used writing rule if ever there was one.

But that's fodder for another grind of the grist mill; my arm's tired now.

**Be soon and write well.**

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## Gretel has Little Red Riding Hood to Tea at the Ritz

by Sarah E. Skwire

The china clinks. No gingerbread is ordered.  
We eye each other warily, we two,  
Who separately have gone through much the same  
Ordeal, but who have nothing beyond that  
To bind us to each other. Drinking tea  
Beneath the burning crystal chandeliers  
That look so much like sugar candy...No.  
I do not think I will go into that.

Instead I ask her why she wandered off.  
I mean, I know about her granny, sick  
And all alone. She was to bring the cakes  
And wine. I know that part, but why she left  
Protection, left the path, I'll never guess.  
If anyone had cared what might become  
Of me, or knit me cheerful scarlet hoods,  
Or warned me, worried, not to go too far  
I might have never done the things I did.  
I might have never hoped the things I hoped.

You see, the witch was better than my mother.  
I thought it would be nice to stay with her,  
Just for a little while. But Hansel, well,  
He longed for home so badly, marked the paths  
So many times, I couldn't let him stew  
About it any longer. She died...No.  
I have to be the subject of that clause  
Like it or not, I've learned I have to be.

I killed her. Killed the wrong one. I have thought  
So many times so late at night that she  
Was not the one who should have died.  
I store that thought away for later brooding.

My therapist assures me that I did  
The only sane thing that I could have done.  
I murdered her, saved him; I got him home,  
And now I'm here with her, tea at the Ritz,  
White gloves, all ladylike, and sugar...No.  
I will not think about that craving now.  
Instead I lean towards her, and I ask,  
"Why did you leave the path? Adventure? Lost?  
Or mere stupidity? Why did you go?"

She looks up, cookie crumbs around her mouth,  
Considering. Her tongue catches a crumb,  
And my hands curl against the tablecloth.  
I will not do this. I will not be tempted.  
I will not put to use the things I've learned  
From mothers, witches, wolves, and forest paths.

I smile sedately, drink my tea, and nod,  
As she politely tries to answer me,  
To struggle with the sense of all her nonsense  
To see what makes her different from me.

I wonder how she'd taste with honey glaze.